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# **The Aim of American Medicine Within the Constraints of Today's Society**

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WHAT SHOULD BE the aim of American medicine within the constraints of today's society? These are times of great change in health care, and American medicine is inescapably a part of this change. Since the turn of the century this nation has been able to give better health care to more people than had ever been possible before. The aim of American medicine was to promote this new scientific medicine, and this was clear enough and was generally accepted. Progress in medical science and public support of it, and of the skills and wherewithal to deliver modern scientific care, made this achievement possible. But now this success has a down side. The costs have come to be considered unacceptable, and a host of new ethical, moral and legal questions have been raised, most of which have yet to be resolved. All of this has led society to place unprecedented constraints upon physicians and health care, constraints that increasingly impinge upon what takes place between doctors and their patients and affect the actual care of patients in many ways.

Every known human society has had some form of medicine and it would seem that medicine somehow fills a very deep human need. If so, then should the aim of medicine be to fill this need, and if this is so, then just what is this need? Is it for practical aid and personal comfort in the face of the fear or reality of pain, serious disability or death, or even mere physical or mental discomfort, or—perhaps just as important—for some help in contending with the reality of life? The “horse

and buggy doctor” shared illness and death and anxiety and hope with patient and family, and gave solace and strength to both through his authority as a physician, and he was loved and revered.

Just as modern medical science and new medical technology have had profound social, economic and political effects upon society as a whole, so have the responses of society in the form of social, economic and political pressures and constraints profoundly affected medicine and health care in this nation. There is a new and complex interdependence among all the parties at interest in health care, and a new need to try to clarify and agree upon the aim of medicine as this relates to the needs of patients and the health care of society as a whole.

The editors of *The Western Journal of Medicine* propose to provide a forum for dialogue and discussion of the aim and purpose of medicine within the constraints now being placed on health care. The forum is initiated with the statements beginning on the following pages. Readers and others are invited to submit their views constructively and succinctly. As many as space permits will be published in future issues of the journal. At an appropriate time all the material will be collated and, if possible, the distillate will be prepared as a statement on “The Aim of American Medicine Within the Constraints of Today's Society.”

MSMW